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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000721

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KIRF IS

SUBJECT: LOYALTY VERSUS DISCONTENT AMONG ISRAEL'S DRUZE COMMUNITY

REF: 06 TEL AVIV 4111

Classified By: Classified by PolCouns Marc Sievers for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶11. (C) Summary and Comment:** During an MFA-sponsored Druze Study Day for members of the diplomatic corps on March 20, Deputy Foreign Minister Majaleh Wahbeh (Kadima) and other Druze community leaders emphasized the Druze community's loyalty to Israel during the past sixty years and its desire to enjoy economic opportunities commensurate with its position as an Israeli minority accorded special status. The Druze leadership focused on the community's accomplishments and service to the State of Israel, highlighting Druze military service and good relations with the Jewish leadership as well as other minorities in Israel. Noticeably absent, however, was any mention of the mounting frustration over the Druze sense that they are not treated as fully equal citizens, as evidenced by recent tensions between Druze and Jewish residents of Peki'in, and last October's armed clashes in that town between Druze youth and Israeli police. Absent a serious and sustained GOI effort to improve the quality of life in Druze communities, we expect the Druze leadership to find it gradually more difficult to sell the loyalty message to an increasingly skeptical younger generation. End Summary and Comment.

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LOYAL CITIZENS WITH EQUAL RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS  
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**¶12. (U)** Deputy FM Wahbeh opened the Druze Study Day on a personal note by highlighting his own successful career climbing the ranks of the Israeli government. He told the assembled diplomats that Druze citizens are getting closer to achieving full equality with Israel's Jewish citizens, noting that in 2007 he was Israel's first non-Jew to serve as Acting President (for a brief period when then-Acting President Dalia Itzik was traveling abroad). Wahbeh discussed Israel's current political situation, noting that not a single day goes by without attacks on Israeli citizens. He condemned Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah for depriving others of their rights and faith, and called for a moral distinction between these organizations, which aim to target innocent civilians, and Israel, which attempts to preserve civilian life. Echoing a central GOI view, Wahbeh called for more pressure on Iran now in order to avoid a difficult situation in the future. He described Israel as a "flourishing" state and told the diplomats that the Druze have a special standing among the country's minority groups. Speaking to the Druze community elders in attendance, Wahbeh said, "We should be proud of our achievements and work harder for the success of our community and Israel."

**¶13. (U)** Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Moafaq Tarif and Professor of Entomology Fadel Mansour joined Wahbeh in addressing the diplomats on similar themes. Tarif emphasized that the Druze fulfill their duties as loyal Israeli citizens

by serving in the Israel Defense Forces. The Druze, he said, aspire to achieve their rights as equal citizens with equal opportunities. Mansour noted that although the Druze do not yet enjoy economic and professional opportunities equivalent to the Jewish community in Israel, they are getting closer. He added that the Jewish people had brought many achievements to all people in Israel and said that he was "proud to be an Israeli."

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DRUZE AS KEY SUPPORTERS OF REGIONAL PEACE  
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¶4. (C) Wahbeh, Tarif and Mansour all conveyed support for a regional peace and highlighted the importance of peace in the Druze religion. Wahbeh described the achievement of peace as one of Israel's main goals as well as a personal goal and he praised Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as a representative of those who believe in a two-state solution. Sheikh Tarif pointed to the Druze as a bridge between the Jews and other minorities in Israel, explaining that the Druze live in harmony with everyone and work to strengthen coexistence among all communities in Israel. He noted that as loyal citizens, Israeli Druze have no contact with the Druze of Syria and Lebanon, despite their historical and religious ties, and said the Druze "desire a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East that will end violence between neighbors and human beings and enable us to visit our brothers and holy places in other countries." (Note: The claim not to be in contact with Druze communities in Lebanon and Syria is not quite accurate, as Israeli Druze leaders have in the past described their ongoing though circuitous connections with at least Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and his community in Lebanon, and have in the past

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requested USG assistance to ensure Jumblatt's welfare.)

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COMMENT: CRACKS IN THE FACADE  
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¶5. (C) The rosy picture of Druze-Israeli relations painted by Wahbeh, Tarif and Mansour demonstrates the commitment of the established Druze leadership to maintaining the traditional Druze loyalty to the State of Israel. It is clear, however, from recent events, that another more ambivalent position regarding the status of the Druze in Israel is taking shape in the Druze community, particularly among young people tired of waiting for the promise of equal opportunity to materialize. Last October's clashes between armed Druze youths and police in the northern town of Peki'in -- which some Druze contacts likened to an IDF raid on a terrorist stronghold -- exposed a growing divide within the Druze community over the best way to improve the welfare of Druze communities. While some Druze leaders, represented by Wahbeh and other longtime loyalists, continue their quiet campaign to ensure that their community has access to all the economic and educational opportunities available in Israel, others, mainly mayors and local activists in the Galilee, believe the Druze should be louder and more forceful in their fight for full equality.

¶6. (SBU) In July 2007, prominent Druze mayor Akram Hasson, not in attendance at the Study Day, gave voice to the discontent and sense of abandonment felt by some within the Druze community in an open letter to Jewish communities in Israel and the world. Outlining Druze support for the State of Israel since 1948, Hasson charged that the Israeli government was not rewarding the loyalty of its Druze citizens: "The government had turned (its back on us), there is no industry in our settlements, our socio-economic condition is bad, we have 50 percent unemployment...and we still are the lowest percent of educated people in Israel."

¶7. (C) Although a long way from open rebellion, the Druze

community in Israel is nevertheless undergoing a painful reexamination of its status in Israel and its relations with the Jewish state. We expect the resentment and Druze-Jewish tensions to continue mounting, despite the best efforts of Druze leaders such as Wahbeh, unless the GOI makes a determined and enduring commitment to improving the welfare of Druze communities.

¶8. (C) While the GOI's record on sustaining government initiatives to improve conditions in minority communities is not promising, there are signs that the Israeli leadership is aware of the looming crisis in the Druze community, and is prepared to take steps to head it off. In the summer of 2006, the GOI announced the allocation of approximately USD \$100 million for 2006-2009 to improve education and opportunities in Druze and Circassian communities. During an April 2007 event honoring the Druze religion, PM Olmert described the initiative as a government priority, reflecting the &blood covenant<sup>8</sup> between Jews and Druze -- a reference to the distinguished military record of many Druze soldiers in the IDF. Olmert reiterated this theme following the Peki,in clashes, when he publicly promised to Sheikh Tarif that the government would fulfill its pledge to &reduce gaps regarding the Druze community, especially in regard to education and discharged young Druze soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Whether such efforts are enough to repair fraying Druze-Jewish relations is not clear, but, if implemented, they at least reflect a step in the right direction.

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